

A.B.C. Prunes, U.F.O. News, and Politicks: Parody in Media Literacy Education

—Ralph Ohta

Who Makes Parodies?

In my eight years of teaching in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, I have come to learn that children really enjoy making fun of popular songs (“Jingle bells, Batman smells”). It comes easily to them. They also like to joke around with celebrities’ names (“Gherl Pauwhah!” “I’m Stupid Spice!”), and imitate teachers’ use of hand gestures and habitual use of such phrases as, “Like, you know...” Children seem to have a natural gift for making parodies out of the things that are a familiar part of their world.

I have also noticed that children are not alone in their interest in parody. When I conducted a video in-service session in my school district, the teachers appeared to drift quite naturally toward the use of humor in developing their projects. Initially, they seemed uncertain what to do when I invited them to create and tape a commercial that would sell a particular product to a specific market. However, their indecision soon turned into smiles when a member of their group suggested making fun of existing commercials and/or commercial styles as part of their project. In spite of this tendency, an underlying uneasiness about engaging in parody prevailed, as if creating something funny were unacceptable—as if having fun while working on an assignment was against the rules.

Definitions of Parody

In order to understand why anyone should consider using parody as a tool to teach media literacy, it will be useful to understand what parody is. Webster’s College Dictionary defines parody as “a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing (1995).” Melvin Helitzer (1984) describes parody as a form of humor that privileges irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, and incongruity. Parody mimics something serious for comedic effect, and its use should not be limited simply to serious writing. Parody works just as well in making fun of other media, such as television commercials and music videos.

Teaching Parody in Media Education

Over several years of teaching media education to elementary school students, I have discovered that critical viewing in media literacy requires children to learn how to “read”

images, sounds, dialogue, and the pacing of media “texts.” “Readers” of media use the conventions and structures of the various media genres, much as readers of books use their knowledge of the conventions and structures of written texts to extract and create meaning from a written passage. I want my students to develop the skills to become life-long critical readers of media. One of the best ways to develop these skills, I found, was to provide students with the opportunity to create their own media. As students become familiar with the conventions and structures of the media they are working with, they are able to identify them, analyze their effects, and use them to communicate their own messages.

How do students learn these genre-specific conventions? With print genres, they often learn through story analysis; for example, they complete charts that direct them to identifying time, setting, protagonist, antagonist, problem, solution, and events. Similarly, in media education, teachers engage students in activities that help them learn about media conventions and structures. In a lesson on situation comedies, for instance, students begin by viewing some examples and then proceed to an analysis of their common features and differences. They might answer questions such as “How do the main characters physically interact with each other?” “How do they interact with the camera and audience?” “What is the duration of each segment of the show?” “How frequent are the commercial breaks, and how long are they?” and “What are the characteristics of the plot?”

Students learn that traditional sitcoms made use of only two sets to represent the two central locations where actors gather and interact. In *Cheers*, for example, most of the action takes place at a bar. In *Happy Days*, most of the action takes place in Arnold’s Restaurant or in the Cunningham’s house (Fonzie’s loft is part of their house). In contemporary situation comedies, however, the action usually takes place in more than two locations. In *Frazier*, for example, the settings include Frazier’s home, the coffee shop, and the radio station. In addition, the actors almost always face the audience as they would in a theatrical performance.

Another characteristic of the genre is the laugh track, in which laughter is dubbed onto the tape so that it is heard after every joke, no matter how lacking in humor the jokes

may be. When a show is filmed before a live audience, the audience is cued to laugh, sigh, and say, “awwww...” at the appropriate times. A common feature of the sitcom is that any problems that arise are usually solved by the end of that episode and do not continue from one episode to the next as in soap operas. As a culminating activity, students could develop their ideas on what might make a good sitcom and their work could be evaluated on the basis of how well they have incorporated and utilized the conventions and structures of the genre into their own projects.

In my experience, when students are asked to create their own video, they can benefit from imitating a show's style. In my fifth grade class, for example, the students created a video about the game POGs (POGs are milk bottle caps that were used in a popular children's game in the early nineties). The students based their video on elements of the award winning show, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. Their aim was to create an informative video that they planned to send to a class in Kentucky. After viewing an episode of Bill Nye, the students analyzed and discussed what they liked about the show and identified the production techniques that they thought were most effective. Next, they began storyboarding their own video—a process that involved making decisions about the type and duration of shots they would use and how they would contribute to the overall intent and flow of their project. Based on their analysis of Bill Nye, they decided to make use of quick cuts, different angles, and humorous dialog in order to inform and educate their viewers of the history, value, and rules of POGs. After they completed their storyboard, the students went to various locations around the school to film their video. During these shoots, the students needed to deal with wind, back lighting, and noise while continually checking their storyboards to ensure that they were keeping to their original plans. They carefully monitored their footage to help them decide if they needed to go back and re-shoot a particular segment. During the final editing stage, the students reviewed their work to determine whether specific segments helped or hindered the flow of the video. In the end, the students were satisfied that their video production had accomplished its aims. By imitating *Bill Nye the Science Guy's* structures and format, the students were able to create an interesting and informative documentary on POGs.

Parody is a form of imitation with the added elements of comedic twists, turns, and exaggerations. To create a parody of something, one has to understand it before beginning to

alter it for humorous effect. Parodies are used by teachers of writing, music, and art as a method of educating and evaluating students' understanding of the styles of the masters. Parody is also a useful and valuable activity in media education. Parody can reinforce what the students have learned by allowing them to transform the original story into something new, while retaining the structures and conventions of the original work.

Elementary school teachers may wonder if parody is appropriate for their students. Linda Gibson Geller, in her article, *A Verbal Gold Mine: Parody Play in the Classroom* (1982), claims that humor can facilitate children's language development. She also discusses how she uses parodies of television shows in her classroom of nine-, ten-, and eleven-year-old students to develop their critical thinking skills.

In Britain, critical viewing of cultural and social representations in the media is an important curriculum goal. The document *Primary Media Education: A Curriculum Statement* (Bazalgette, C. 1989) recommends that children engage in activities that examine how the media represent contemporary life in Great Britain, as well as in the rest of the world. Particular attention is paid to issues of ethnicity, social class, age, gender, values, and customs. Images are interpreted, compared, and considered from different points of view. If, as Helitzer (1984) maintains, the intent of parody is to point out things that are wrong in our world, then parody in media education may help children to see how the media portrays different segments of the population and this may lead them to challenge and change these views in their own productions. I have found this to be true. Parody in media or video education allows students to analyze and come to a better understanding, not only the structures and conventions of the various genres of the media, but also of the world around them. It provokes them to question what they see. I illustrate this point with three examples. The first shows students analyzing, questioning, and playing with the genre of television news. The final two examples are parodies of T.V. commercials.

U.F.O. News 541

During a year spent as a video resource teacher, where I was responsible for supporting other teachers, I happened to work with a teacher who was teaching his students about making news broadcasts. The first stage of this process was for the students to analyze newspaper articles. They focused on what information was included and how that informa-

tion was presented. The students then composed their own newspaper articles based on events they imagined would take place in the future. The culminating product of stage one was a futuristic newspaper.

The second stage of the teacher's unit plan was to have the students analyze a news broadcast and then create one of their own. I worked with the students on analyzing different types of stories that were typically included in news broadcasts—their length, order, and the average number of shots in each story. We also looked at the composition of the shots, and the pacing and clarity of the anchors' speech, composure, and nonverbal expressions. The students then revised their futuristic stories for broadcast and arranged their ideas on a storyboard. Next, we taped the stories and edited them to make U.F.O News 541.

What I found to be interesting with this project was that most of the news stories seemed to naturally emerge in the form of parodies. In the news story, "Ice Martians," for example, a blue Plutonian lady laments that one of the aliens has frozen her hair. This story could be seen, on one level, as making fun of the expectations of women to be vain, superficial and feminine; yet, on another level, the blue Plutonian lady goes on to say that she punched the alien in the nose, showing that women should not be provoked because, in reality, women can also be aggressive. Immediately after the blue lady says that she punched the alien in the nose, she pretends that she has injured her hand in the process. The student's performance was deliberately ironic and aimed to make fun of and undermine certain social expectations of women's behavior.

Krystie's "U.F.O. Editorial"

In the next news story, a student named Krystie created an amusing caricature of a television news anchor. Her story was enhanced by her amusing performance. Although news anchors sometimes become emotional in presenting their stories, they typically exhibit a great deal of restraint. Krystie went to the other extreme. She gradually lost her composure and sanity as the show progressed. In this way, Krystie was able to use parody to question the journalistic style of the news anchor and to offer a critique of the genre.

Change

In "Change," a child swallows a dollar bill. After the incident, the public immediately demands that plastic cards replace paper money as they are more difficult for children to swallow. The government begins shredding dollar bills

in a frantic attempt to replace them with the "Money Card." This results in the currency of the United States being completely replaced by plastic cards almost over night. Thus, the students make fun of how decisions with long-lasting consequences are made in response to the over-sensationalized coverage of a single event. In addition, the students demonstrated their knowledge of the power of the media in influencing life-affecting decisions. In their parody, the news media simply picked up the story because they lack news for that evening's broadcast. The message is that the media not only report on what's happening in the world; they may irresponsibly affect change. The U.F.O. News 541 lesson gave the children a safe environment in which they could express themselves through parody. They demonstrated their creativity, used critical thinking skills to decide how to communicate their stories, practiced their oral and nonverbal communication skills, learned about the structures and conventions used in a news broadcast, and had fun in the process. As Bryant & Zillman (1988) have noted, using humor in the classroom has the potential to increase student attention, reduce stress, and build a positive classroom climate.

A.B.C. Prunes

In the 1994–95 school year I worked as a video resource teacher at Waiau Elementary School teaching critical viewing skills to fifth graders. The students were asked to analyze and critique a number of television advertisements (Ohta & Tobin, 1995), and then invited to create their own video commercials. During one of these lessons I showed a Sunsweet Prunes commercial which featured Barbara Mandrel making the claim that "Sunsweet Prunes are the sweetest prunes because Sunsweet Prunes use the sweetest plums." This claim provoked a discussion among the students. One of them asked, "But how do they know that they're the sweetest?" I asked, "How would you know if anything tastes sweet?" Another student yelled out, "You gotta taste 'em!" I suggested that the students play with this idea and create a parody of the Sunsweet Prunes commercial. The students came up with "A.B.C., or Already Been Chewed Prunes", whose slogan was "The Prunes that have Already Been Chewed to guarantee sweetness."

This commercial, in my opinion, was probably the most successful parody created by my students. They made a clear parody of Sunsweet Prunes' with their outrageous claim of chewing their own prunes to ensure their sweetness. The students showed what they knew about the structures and

conventions of commercials by keeping their commercial length to approximately 30 seconds, which included their product in the closing shot. They also began and ended their commercial with a slogan. They carefully imitated Mandrel's calm and soothing delivery of Sunsweet Prunes' claim. The completed commercial met Helitzer's requirements for a good parody by imitating the serious Sunsweet Prunes commercial while exaggerating its claim for a humorous effect. It was judged very funny by everyone who viewed the parody. Such is not the case with the next video commercial.

Parameters

The following discussion of "Splash and Drown Darbie" is an example of the misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and/or clashes of values that can occur when children engage in parody. When I shared this video, created by a group of fifth graders (three boys and a girl), with teachers and graduate students during a university summer session course, half of the class laughed at the children's handiwork and half of the class were disturbed that this video was created by children and that their teacher allowed them to produce what they considered to be offensive material.

Splash and Drown Darbie began as a critical viewing exercise. I showed the students various video clips of commercials, and asked them to identify the main selling point of each commercial. I then encouraged them to point out all of the ways that the advertisers reinforced their selling point within the commercial by using music, lighting, staging, narration, and camera angles. The students also made some inferences about the intended audience. Following this, I asked the students if they felt that the commercials' claims were believable or if there was anything that they felt was unrealistic or deceptive about the representation of the product being sold. Finally, we brainstormed ways that we could change or exaggerate the commercial's claims or the product itself to turn it into a parody. The students came up with responses that were creative, insightful, and funny. At least, some people thought so.

That night, their homework was to watch television, find any "serious" commercial, identify its main selling point, see if there was any claim that was made that was unbelievable, and see if they could change any part of the commercial's claim or product to parody it. The following day, the students were asked to meet three criteria before they could start on their parody: they needed to describe the commercial, identify its main selling point, and tell how they would change

the commercial to make it funny. When they had done this, they were able to start on a storyboard that detailed how the commercial would look and sound on camera.

One group of students created a proposal for "Splash and Drown Darbie." They met all of the above criteria. They were able to describe the commercial—a Splash and Dive Barbie commercial that showed a Barbie doll swimming underwater. They identified its main selling point—a Barbie doll that swims. They explained why the commercial was unbelievable—Barbie dolls cannot swim. And, finally, they had an idea about how to make a parody of the commercial—a Splash and Drown Darbie doll that, like all dolls, cannot swim. They created a storyboard that showed how the Darbie doll commercial would be filmed (Darbie drowning among fishes in the ocean). At this point, it was clear that the children's project met the criteria for parody by inverting the intent of the advertisers to portray the Barbie doll as really swimming on its own. However, when I shared this video with the graduate school class, some members objected to the title and the fact that "Darbie" drowned.

What can be learned from this reaction? One lesson is that it is important to consider audience reactions and the different values that people may hold about parodies, or any form of media. Another is that audience members may read too much into the playful behavior and humor of children. I do not mean to argue, here, that anything goes. I do believe that teachers must set parameters when producing videos, just as they do with student's creative writing projects. These parameters will necessarily vary from teacher to teacher and classroom to classroom. Most teachers, it is generally agreed, should place limits on humor that is racist, sexist, involves stereotyping, or includes swearing, "toilet humor," or sexual references. And students should understand why such humor can be hurtful. The main goal and purpose of using parody in media literacy education is to help the students learn and question the world around them. It should not be used as a justification for mean-spirited attitudes and behaviors. Thus, parameters need to be made clear at the beginning of the parody lesson for the teacher's as well as the students' benefit. The parameters that one chooses will depend on the children's grade level, the political and social climate of the nation and state, the school community's overall attitude towards certain issues, and the intended audience. Students should be involved in parameter setting and consider such things as: How will this make different people feel? Is this really funny? And could we show it to the principal?

Conclusion

Using children's natural gift for and love of parody is a valuable and important tool in media education. As students learn more about how various genres produce their effects, they are empowered to "talk back" to the media using their own productions. They can also have some fun in the process. Of course, there are questions that teachers should consider before they begin: How will I grade a parody? What If I don't see the humor in the student's parody, but the imitation is accurate? What parameters are reasonable to set in terms of content? Once consideration has been given to these questions, the process can become a rewarding and successful learning experience for all. I encourage teachers to use the power of parody with students.

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